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Narrative Reliefs of Bhima and Purushamriga at Vijayanagara

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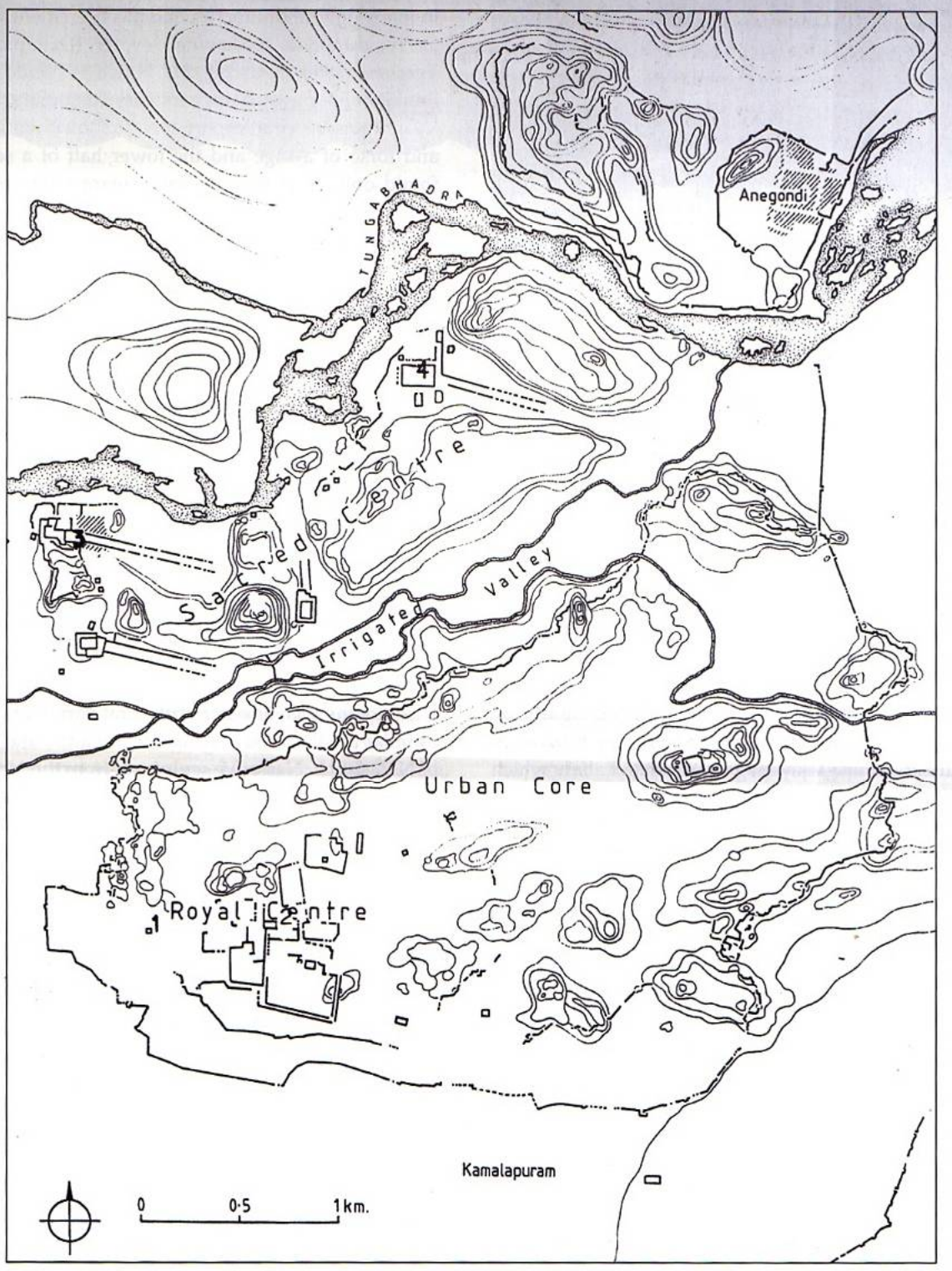

1. Map of Hampi-Vijayanagara

2. Bhima and Purushamriga, on two facets of a pillar, Prasanna Virupaksha temple

Hampi-Vijayanagara, the capital of the Vijayanagara kingdom from the mid-fourteenth to the mid-sixteenth century, was the locus of extensive sculptural and architectural activity. The remains of the core of this vast metropolis extend over approximately twenty-five square kilometres, an area within which are found the ruins of a variety of religious and secular structures as well as vast quantities of sculpture.

The variety and wealth of themes in Vijayanagara sculpture and iconography are so extensive that even after years of study some are difficult to identify. This is especially so because of the local and folk elements that appear in the sculptural repertoire. In our joint book on sculpture at Hampi-Vijayanagara, we listed a few which we had problems identifying, in the hope that in the future we might be able to get some information on these (Dallapiccola and Verghese, 1998, p. 22 and Appendix V).

Among these problematic images is one of a man, with a raised gada in one hand, running away from a *linga*, towards which his other hand is extended. This sculpture appears four times (Fig.1):

1. On a pillar in the detached *mandapa* of the Prasanna Virupaksha temple ("Underground Temple") (Fig. 2)
2. On a plinth moulding, to the north of the door leading into the antechamber, in the subsidiary shrine within the Ramachandra temple complex (Fig. 3)
3. On the south exterior face of the *rangamandapa* of the great Virupaksha temple
4. On the north exterior wall of the *vimana* of the Virupaksha temple (Fig. 4)

In all these, behind the *linga*, appears a composite being, with the top half of a bearded sage, wearing a mukuta, and the lower half of a lion. This figure holds an arati in one hand, a bell in the other. Since in the two examples at the Virupaksha temple, the man with the *gada* and the composite creature are separated by a pilaster and, in the example in the Prasanna Virupaksha temple they appear on two facets of a pillar, we did not, for a long time, appreciate that the two figures were to be seen together, forming a narrative relief. Indeed, the composite being appears by himself in these, as well as in many other monuments, and has been identified by us as Vyaghrapada, a Shaivite devotee (Dallapiccola and Verghese, 1998, p. 40, Fig. 21). However, while the man-lion Shaivite devotee appears very frequently, Patanjali, Vyaghrapada's counterpart, who is shown with the head and torso of a sage and the lower half of a serpent, is found only once among Vijayanagara sculptures at the site. This raised a doubt as to whether or not the former is really Vyaghrapada or some other Shaivite devotee.

By chance, Anna Dallapiccola came across the story which is depicted in these four narrative reliefs, namely that of Bhima and Purushamriga, in a Kannada version of the *Mahabharata*.[1] The episode is drawn from the *Kannada Bharata*, written by Kumaravyasa, in the fifteenth century. Interestingly, this story is not only missing in the *Mahabharata*, but is also not present in all the extant copies of Kumaravyasa's Bharata, although the author was himself a Virashaiva. The importance given in this episode to the worship of the linga hints at the possibility of this being a Virashaiva addition to the original narrative. This indicates that this story may have been either a fairly late invention or an interpolation by a scribe or copyist of the work, keen to make a point in favour of Virashaivism in an epoch in which this faith had lost some of its influence.

Of the Vijayanagara sculptural narratives, the most popular are the *Ramayana*, the Krishna-lila and the story of Narasimha. Narrative sculptures from the *Mahabharata* are comparatively few. Apart from the four carvings of the Bhima-Purushamriga story from the *Kannada Bharata*, there are only a couple of *Mahabharata* narratives and a few sculptures of Bhima alone, two located near gateways and a few on pillars.

It is obvious that the Bhima Purushamriga episode was known to the contemporary visitors to these temples: in all four examples under review, Bhima, identifiable by his mace (*gada*), is on the run. His other arm is outstretched with the hand open. This captures the moment when during his flight Bhima drops a hair resulting in a million *lingas* springing up; the latter are represented symbolically by the one *linga* seen in the relief. The pursuing Purushamriga has stopped his chase in order to worship the *lingas*, as denoted by the ceremonial *arati* and the bell in his two hands.

According to the story, Bhima was entrusted with the mission of inviting the Purushamriga to attend the great royal consecration ceremony of Yudhishthira

3. Bhima and Purushamriga, on a plinth moulding, subsidiary shrine, Ramachandra temple

Purushamriga lived on Mount Kailasha and, being a great devotee of Shiva, was engrossed in prayers and in meditation. On his way to Mount Kailasha, Bhima met Hanuman, and after acknowledging the latter's power, he received three of Hanuman's hairs as a talisman. Each hair, when dropped, would produce one million *lingas*.

Purushamriga accepted the invitation on the condition that he would closely follow Bhima, and kill him if he caught him on the way. So Bhima started running, with Purushamriga close on his heels. Each time that Bhima was on the verge of being caught by Purushamriga, he dropped one of Hanuman's hairs. The hair produced one million *lingas* and Purushamriga, being a great devotee of Shiva, stopped to do *puja* to the *lingas*. Twice Bhima gained time in this manner by dropping a hair, and finally, exhausted, he stumbled on the threshold of the sacrificial hall and fell across it. At that moment, Purushamriga grabbed him by the waist and claimed that he had won. However, Lord Krishna, who was present in the great hall, decided that Bhima had not been defeated because the most important limb of the body, namely his head, was already in the pavilion when Purushamriga caught him.

Of the four examples of the Bhima and Purshamriga story extant at the site, three are in Shaiva temples and one in a Vaishnava one. All three temples – the great Virupaksha, the Prasanna Virupaksha and the Ramachandra – are monuments of royal significance.

The Virupaksha temple, in the 'sacred centre' of the city, is dedicated to the original principal deity of Hampi, chosen by the founders of the kingdom as the patron god of their royal lineage as well as of the capital and the kingdom. The core of this temple pre-dates the Vijayanagara state; however, the temple, as it exists today, is largely of the Vijayanagara period. The exterior of the *vimana* and the *rangamandapa* of this temple probably date from the fifteenth century.

The core of the Prasanna Virupaksha temple, located in the 'royal centre', dates from the fourteenth century. This temple, which is also dedicated to the patron deity, was in all probability constructed and expanded by the early Vijayanagara monarchs. The Bhima and Purushamriga narrative sculpture is found in a *mandapa*, evidently a later addition of either the fifteenth or the early sixteenth century.

The Ramachandra temple, situated in the very

4. Bhima and Purushamriga, on north exterior wall of the vimana of the Virupaksha temple

heart of the 'royal centre' was a royal monument, erected in the early fifteenth century. However, the subsidiary shrine, in which this particular sculpture is found, is of a later date than the main shrine.

These three were among the principal temples of the city in the fifteenth and even early sixteenth centuries. Indeed, they are among the four temples to which the great king Krishnadevaraya (AD 1509-1529) gave substantial donations in 1513 on the occasion of a solar eclipse (Verghese, 1994, pp. 87-99). The fourth was the Vitthala temple. However, unlike the other three, there is no evidence of the last mentioned monument having any association with the king and court prior to 1513.

It is difficult to date the four reliefs of Bhima and Purushamriga found at the site. Possibly they are all of the fifteenth century. Of the four examples, the most prominent are the two carvings on the south and the north exterior wall of *rangamandapa* in the Virupaksha temple; the next in the detached *mandapa* in the south west corner of the Prasanna Virupaksha temple, and the least noteworthy is on the plinth moulding in the interior of the *mandapa* in the subsidiary shrine of the Ramachandra temple complex. Given the obviously Shaiva nature of the myth of Bhima and Purushamriga, it is not surprising that the depictions are more prominent in the two Shaiva temples.

The Bhima and Purushamriga story is connected to a mythological royal consecration ceremony. Therefore, it is not surprising that these sculptures are found in temples connected with local royalty. Drawing links and parallels, either directly or indirectly, between the living king in his royal city and great kings of the pan-Indian mythology and traditions like Rama, was a way in which the Vijayanagara sovereigns sought recognition and legitimacy (Verghese, 1995, pp. 50-51). The homology drawn between Rama, the ideal king, and of his living counterpart in the 'City of Victory' was obvious. Perhaps, through narrative sculptures such as that of Bhima and Purushamriga, a more subtle and indirect allusion was being made to the king, seen as upholder and protector of *dharma*. Indeed, in the *Mahabharata*, Yudhishthira, to whose consecration ceremony Purushamriga was invited, was also known as Dharmaraja (King of *dharma*).

In the course of the sixteenth century, a plethora of Vaishnava deities were incorporated into the cult, some of the existing temples were enlarged, and new temple complexes built. In none of these dateable later additions or new constructions has this narrative theme been sculpted. A possible reason for the absence of representations of this episode in the sixteenth-century temples may be that although royal patronage was extended both to Shaiva and Vaishnava religious establishments, Vaishnavism was the focus of religious devotion, and the once prominent Virashaivas had lost much of their influence.

These four narrative reliefs of the Bhima-Purushamriga story are in no way outstanding works of art. Yet, they are of interest in the dramatic movement they portray. Also of interest is that these reliefs highlight a local tradition within an otherwise pan-Indian epic. Such local or regional variations are also found occasionally in the *Ramayana* narrative sculptures at the site. The juxtaposition of the classical and the folk traditions in carvings based on textual sources, as well as in sculptural styles, religious cults and practices, is a typical characteristic of Vijayanagara art and culture.

The identity of the 'man with a raised mace' in a running pose, found in these four sculptures, had long baffled us. It was clear that some Shaiva story was depicted. However, the connection between the man, the *linga* and the strange man-lion Shaiva devotee was not as obvious initially. Therefore, we are happy that, at last, we have been able to unravel this small iconographic puzzle.

NOTE

1 In the *Sabhaparva* of the *Kannada Bharata* by Kumaravyasa of Gadag (15th century), edited by S. Basappa, 1974, pp. 319-331.

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